

## [Ed and Ida Gray—Farmers]

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26020 [Life - Lakeland -Ed & Ida [?] Couch - History Paul Diggs

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Gray ,Ed and Ida

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### ED AND IDA GRAY- FARMERS

Six miles south of Plant City, located on the Knee-Smith Road, now under construction by the W P A, is the small farm of Ed and Ida Gray. In this neighborhood there is located about forty swell Negro farmers, with tracts of land ranging from five to one hundred acres. In front of this farm is located the N Y A and 4 H Club camp. This camp was constructed by the N Y A boy's out from Tampa. This tract consists of twenty acres, with one large building and one small building used for cooking. A foundation is laid for a second buildings This camp is supervised by Miss Floy Britt of Tampa, Florida. A large portion is cleared for camping purposes. The majority of the farm land in this area is cleared for for farming; the rest is in timber comprising cypress and pine. The houses are built out of weather-board, pine and cypress. Most of the farm houses are built out of roughly cut lumber from the land that was cleared.

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The tract where Ed is farming is rolling and sandy loam soil, with a few orange trees at the western end of the farm. Workers can be seen in the fields in all directions, picking strawberries and planting new crops. In most cases whole families go into the fields.

To enter Ed's farm, you enter the yard from the highway, and sitting in front of the entrance is a tin top log cabin, that is setting high off of the ground, and surrounded by high oaks. In front of the house in large pots are flowers. On 2 the west is an inclosed chicken yard, with plenty of chickens in them. The hen house that was once burned, still stands. In the rear of the house is a pump, near the kitchen door. To the east near the house is a large pile of logs used for fire wood. Under the large oak tree in the rear of the cabin is a stand built for a wash stand. Three large tubs and a water bucket sit on it. Thirty feet from the cabin is a shed built out of old lumber used to assort and pack strawberries in.

In this shed, Bessie, Rosa Lee and Ed's wife Ida were working. As fast as Ida could wash the strawberries, Bessie and Rosa Lee would pack them in pint boxes. Over a rack was a granny sack stretched to allow the water to drip to the ground. When the berries were dumped on them, Bessie [said?], “ we pack thirty six pint to the crate.”

Ed came up from the field and remained around the shed awhile. During this [interlude?], the dog, “ Spot,” was busy barking. They called to him, and he quickly walked away wagging his tail. In his retreat be made for the cat “ Topsy” who out-distance Spot in their race [and?] ran up one of the tall oak trees.

Ed said, “ I have a large family.” They all do not live with me. The ones that are in my house, Bessie over there, age 19; Rosa lee, age 28; [Fannie?] Young, who lives about a mile from her fathers home; ( her children was playing around the shed) Earnestine, age 9; Junior, age 8; and Jane, age 7; The other children away fro home are Neta, age 29; and George, age 24. George lives in Lakeland, Florida, and is employed by Dr. John G. Lester, 1823 S. Florida Avenue. George is married.

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My children work hard on our place. This is their only source of income.”

Ed is very intelligent, and a well looking man, very dark in complexion, dressed in overalls, and [a?] wide brim hat was sitting back on his head.

Ida is very stout, [?] to in color, and wore a gingham dress with white flowers. An apron covered part of it, and an old straw hat was perched on her head.

Rosa Lee is very large, with dark complexion. She was very quiet and did not have very much to say.

Bessie said, “ we are fortunate to have strawberries on hand yesterday we received 15¢ a box for the berries. We are busy now trying to get some of them ready for the market. We have a large market in [Plant?] City, supposed to be the largest market in the world. When we take the strawberries to the market, all we have to do is drive right up and they give you your price right now. ”

During this conversation Ed had gone back to the field and soon returned with his mule “ Jack” hitched too sled. On the sled were several boxes of strawberries. “ It is easy to get the berries in from the field this way. The sled does not ruin the grounds.” Jack is well trained, and after Ed had unloaded the strawberries, walked over to the water pump and stopped. Ed immediately began to pump a tub full of water. Jack drank until he he had satisfied himself. Then he stood perfectly quiet while [Bob?] barked and jumped up after him.

[Fannie?] who had gone in the field and appeared again in the shed. Fannie said,” I come over to help father pick his strawberries, we have a small plot planted over to our place.”

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[Fannie?] is much smaller than her other two sisters, and brown in complexion. She had on a brown gingham dress, and a straw hat. She said, “ I like to work on the farm. We

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have a small log cabin over on the hillside about one mile from here. You can see our cabin if you step around this side of the shed. We reach it by the path across the field. On three acres [?] try try to raise food for ourselves and to sell, most of the time, my husband works for other people when he is not helping dad.”

Ed stated, “I was born in Madison, Florida, January 15, 1878. I lived around Live Oak, Florida, nearly eighteen years. I came to Hillsborough County during 1922. I spent a few years in Plant City before coming out here in 1931. I have two brothers living in Tampa, Florida- James and Henry Gray.”

“ When I first came to this place it was a wilderness. The road you came over was just a trail, and now it is not much [?] better. They are preparing it for hard surface. You could'nt see this distance when I first came out here. In fact you could not see as far as my house which is about fifty feet to the road. It was all thicket. I cleared every spot in this place. I still have plenty to do from the looks of all them stumps standing up in the field. I expect to blow them out this summer. I remember when the F C & P. Thats the Florida Central Peninsular Railroad than ran through here. It is now the Plant System. They call it the A C L. We old timers only know it as the Plant System. There were very few Negro families settled out here when I came. Only in the last few years have they [settled?] settled.”

“ My wife was born in Madison, Florida. She does not know here birth-date.” Bessie can tell you. Bessie said, “mother 5 was born in 1887. We have to keep up with mother's age because she soon forgets. All of her people were born around Madison, Florida. She dosen't know any too much about her people. Pa and Ma were old slaves and married in that section.”

Ed said, “ I was educated in Live Oak, Florida. I went as far as the [11th?] grade. All of my children went as far as the [7th?] and 10th grade. Bessie went as far as the 10th grade.” Bessie said, “I had to go to school in a car with others children who went to Plant City. They don't have a school bus running out here, because there is not enough children to

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have one. We have a small school down the road, which only goes as high as the [eighth?] grade.”

“ I spent some time in Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College. I was one of the girls of the thirteen chosen to go to the College selected by the N Y A to take a four month course in Home Economics. All of our expenses were paid by the N Y A. I like that kind of work and I am planning to go back in the fall and try to complete the course.”

“ Some day I hope to teach the subject. We have a little course in our school in Plant City. Our little school out here begin their term in April and closes in December. They so that to allow the parents to us their children in the field to pick strawberries. Some work out for others and make money for themselves.”

Ed said, “while we are talking about education, I do read a little at times. My instruction is that education and religion are the two greatest powers on earth.”

“ Religion should be first, and the rest will come. I belong to the Missionary Baptist Church at Antioch. We have 6 service twice a month. Our pastor comes out from Tampa, Florida. We look for his Sunday to come, because we have such good services. We hardly miss our church service, because we feel that God will bless you if you worship him. I don't like the way some things are handled in this world, and especially the people whom I considered to be so religious. Sometimes they play with religion, and that is somethin that you should'nt play with. I don't believe in playing with the Lord's works.”

“ When I first settled here, there was no church out here. More families kept coming and soon we had a small church going. When I first came out here folks said I was crazy, but who is crazy now. One thing I hav'nt been on relief since I have been out here, and hope never to go on. I manage to make enough to take care of myself and family. Somehow the Lord has helped me to to make a living out of it.”

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“ My biggest crop is strawberries and beans, I grow baby lima's peas, irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, peppers, cucumbers, okra, tomatoes, and other vegetables for the table. I hated to plow up two acres of strawberries to make room for my spring crop, and just at the time strawberries are bringing good prices.”

“ I sometime have enough meat to carry me through from one butchering to another. You saw my hogs with those fine pigs coming on.” Up at the end of the field [at the?] edge of the orange groves there is a crude hog pen built. A large hog with five pigs are busy rutting away. We have chickens who are good layers. Some times we take the eggs to town and swap them for flour and meal. The most we have to look for is clothes, and we only need them on Sunday. I can make out with overalls. Thats all a fellow 7 needs when he is farming. We are not so far from town, and you can hit the hard road one mile either way. It only takes ten minutes to go to town. That's why I keep that old T-Model Ford. Its a 1925 model. I use it to haul my berries to town. I am sorry to leave you, I must take this load of berries to town, I will soon be back.”

“ Oh yes, he said while cranking up his car, I have a large tract of sugar cane growing down there near the ditch. I also raise peanut, I use them mostly to fatten my hogs. “ He was off down the dirt road, all you could hear was the jug, jug, of the ford hitting and missing.

Bessie said, “ we manage to keep pretty healthy around here. Our nearest doctor is located in Plant City, and we have a few midwives here.” Ida said, “ that's all I had when my children were born. A pretty healthy looking bunch ain't they? If we get a cut, just get some old axle grease and rub it in good. If the cut is too deep, get some cob -web and that will stop the blood from running. In olden time people did'nt know what a doctor was. Every time you turn a round now, it has to be a doctor for this and a doctor for that. They cut you open for the least little pain. I don't see no sense in it, no I don't.”

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Bessie said, “ I would'nt live in the City, it is too crowded. If I did'nt own a home I would'nt live there. I like to farm, it is not crowded. You can have all the freedom you want. No one to look into you back door.”

Ida had sent the children to the little store down the road for kerosene, so she could cook their dinner. She walked to the fence to see if they were coming, having put a large 8 towel over her shoulders, and still had very little to say.

Ed, had returned from Plant City, and seemed pleased over the price he received for his berries, stating that they had given him 15¢ for his strawberries. And thank goodness I still have more in the field.”

Ed was asked if he ever voted, He stated, “ I have never voted any place. I have always been a man to attend to my own business and leave other peoples alone. In some places it is hard for a colored man to vote. I have never troubled myself about it. I suppose all of this voting business is what hurts some prices on what you raise. I sometime get a hold of newspapers and read them. And sometime around the Market I hear the folks talking about politics, and the war. Do you think we will ever fight again? I hope not. The next war won't be like the last one.

Bessie, who showed interest in the interview said, “ what I learned in school has helped me a lot around here. We have a canning center out here in this settlement. We take our provisions up to the center and can them. See the boxes stacked next to the kitchen cabinet. They are full of canned goods. We can them and pack them back into the boxes, and keep in a cool place. We make our own syrup too. Sometimes we have to have flour, but we exchange eggs for what we want.”

“ I also learned how to make sweet things while in school. Some Sundays I try out making something sweet for dinner.”

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Rosa Lee was busy in the house, walking around and singing some old time song. Later she donned he straw hat, picked up a hoe sitting next to the kitchen doo, and [wlaked?] to the field and began hoeing the corn while she sang on.

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The interior of the home was rustic and was partially ceiled. Long logs ran across the ceiling, and the tin roof could be seen. The rooms were petitioned off with rough cut lumber, with cretonne curtains hanging at the doos. The front room was used for a sitting and bed room. The furnishings consisted of a double bed, an old trunk, a dresser, and one chair and rocker. the other bed room was very spacious, consisting of three beds, and a dresser. There were curtains at the windows. The kitchen furniture consisted of a three hole burner, a large kitchen cabinet, a large round dining room table, and several chairs. A little room was adjoining the house, next to the kitchen door which was once used as a kitchen, Bessie stated.

The floors were bare and nearly white from scrubbing. The interior of the house was as clean and neatly arranged in spite of the crude furnishings.

During all this time Ed was kept busy moving back and forth from the field. He said, “ now I rest awhile and talk to you some more. “ He sat on the door sill. I am trying [to?] put in my spring crop. If we could only get some rain we would get oof to a good start. You noticed how dry everything is. We need rain badly. If I had electricity I could tell what the weather-man is saying over the radio. Then I could own a radio. The best we can depend upon now is to lookk at the sky and watch the moon.”

Farming is nice when you have every thing to farm with. One thing, we can borrow from one another here in the settlement. A poor colored man sees a hard time on the farm. Oh well I guess a poor everybody has it hard. Rich folks buy up 10 acres of land and put folks out to farm, that makes it hard to get hold of land. I need twenty acres more, but I have no way to stretch out. I was lucky when I got hold of this piece of land.”

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“ Now you want to know what I do when I am not working. Well I work all the time that whould be hard to say. You see when a fellow works from sun up to sun down theres is nothing for him to do but go to bed. His bones will make him do that, he will not feel like froilicking. I do go to church when we have service. “ Bessie said, I like to go to the movies, we have moving pictures out here every Friday night. A white man brings his talking machine out. They show mostly Western Pictures, and say the kids are crazy about them. They let the kids in for a nickle under twelve years old. The grown up we have to pay 15¢. Sometime I go into Plant City to the pictures and to dances. Yes I like to dance, when they have good music.”

Ed continued, “ I take my children to church with me. There is nothing better than religious training. I sometime think that is the trouble with the world today we have left God out of our program. We need to get closer to him. He made this world and still will have a hand in running it. It looks like man is trying to take it away from him, but he has his day set to [het?] him straight. God will let you go so far and then he knows how to stop you. It pays to keep on the Lord's side, I pray hard for my family and to have good crops, so far I believe he has answered my prayer.

Some afternoons after some of the boys finish work they come 11 over and chat awhile. Rosa Lee and mother they are home bodies. They never go very much only to church. Some time walk to the next farm to see some of the neighbors, that's about all we can do besides work out here. We are happy when Miss Britt, open up the camp over yonder, we have something to go to every night when they are out. I expect they will have longer camps this summer. Last summer was the first time it opened.

An interruption in the interview was caused by the calling of two insurance men. They apologize, and proceeded in their task. One agent through his sale talk encouraged Bessie to take out a new policy. This she did and signed the application blank. After they had gone Bessie said, I can take care of it throught the winter, but it is hard to keep up in the summer. “ Ida stated, “yes you need insurance, but I don't [??] need of taking any more

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than you can carry. We have insurance on all members of the family. That is the only protection we can get out here. There are no more Negro Fraternities to join. You have to look out for the dying days. We can take care of them sick days.”

Night was coming on, and Ed said well I must feed the stock, I have to carry slop to the hogs and look after old Jack. He extended an invitation to come out to his farm any time. The whole family gathered near the door to say good bye.